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Myanmar at Sixty: On the Brink of an Apocalypse or Reconciliation?

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The run-up to Myanmar's 60th birthday on 04 January 2008 was not a joyous occasion. Neither was the aftermath.

While the regime's crackdown on the 'saffron revolution' in Sept 2007 was fairly predictable, the military's stoic reaction towards the human suffering caused by Cyclone Nargis last month was unexpected. The contrast was even more striking when compared with China's swift and, generally, very competent response to the 7.9 earthquake that struck Sichuan province ten days later. Even China's pet project, the Beijing Olympics, was relegated to a lower level of importance. Contrast this with the top priority of the military regime in Naypyidaw to carry on with a national referendum for a new constitution one week after the cyclone left 2.4 million without shelter and food.

What do the next sixty years hold for Myanmar's ethnically and religiously heterogeneous population? Tobias Rettig, political science professor at the Singapore Management University and a commentator on Southeast Asia states: "Regrettably, even for an optimist, the country's prospects continue to look bleak though, overall, perhaps better than during the 1948-2008 period which was characterised by bloody state- and nation-building."

In fact, history has certainly not treated Myanmar (until 1989 known as Burma) kindly. A cycle of almost continuous civil wars and economic underdevelopment followed the end of British colonial rule in 1948. The country's first experiment with democracy occurred under extremely unfavourable conditions and ended with the 1962 military coup. The country experienced 26 years of civil war, economic isolationism and decline before General Ne Win's Burmese Way to Socialism was replaced. After a brief popular bid for democracy in 1988 and 1990, the aptly named State Law and Order Council (SLORC) transformed itself into the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, but stuck to its vision of a disciplined democracy.

Economic and Social Malaise

Even before Cyclone Nargis tore its path of destruction through the Irrawaddy delta, the country's statistics left little to celebrate. A 2007 report by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) estimated the rate of infant mortality in Myanmar at 105 per 1,000 live births -- three times higher than in Indonesia, about seven times higher than Thailand, and thirty times higher than Singapore.

Malnourished children in Myanmar account for 31.8% of the population against 3.4% in Singapore, thus producing a future underclass of adults whose brains risk remaining underdeveloped for lack of protein and nutrients. The country's economic prospects are also adversely affected by communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. While ASEAN statistics for HIV/AIDS among those aged 15-49 is 0.5%, Burma is experiencing serious problems with national adult prevalence at 1.3% and 2.2% for young people.

"It is not difficult to see that these numbers will worsen as a result of the trail of destruction left by Cyclone Nargis," observes Rettig. "After the poor rice harvest of October-November 2007, the harvest of May 2008 was completely destroyed in the affected areas which contribute about two thirds to the country rice bowl. Moreover, so are the seeds for the next rice harvest that should normally be in June."

New Constitution

How will a looming food security crisis affect the Tatmadaw (Burmese military forces) and Senior General Than Shwe's leadership? "Provided that Myanmar's top leader has not miscalculated the possible crisis ahead, which might explode in six or twelve months, he will mobilise all resources to complete the seven-step roadmap towards 'disciplined' democracy", says Rettig. "Thus elections have been scheduled for 2010, which are meant to further institutionalise the military's power," he added.

Indeed, the outcome of the 10 May referendum came as no surprise, and has given the current regime a constitution which guarantees the Tatmadaw 25% of parliamentary seats (110 out of 440). As a parliamentary majority of three quarters is required to change the constitution, even a resounding electoral victory of the National League of Democracy (NLD) or a coalition of parties composed of the NLD and ethnic minority parties could not overturn the military's grip on power. "It is also likely that the military would resort to similar techniques used during the referendum to avoid the shock defeat it suffered in 1990 against Nobel Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy," said Rettig.

Under the new constitution, additional clauses ensure that key positions, such as the President and the Ministers for Defence, Home, and Border Areas, are reserved for the military only. Further, a special emergency clause gives the

President the constitutional right to dissolve parliament. The crafters of the constitution also had the foresight to ban the regime's nemesis, Aung San Suu Kyi, from holding elected office on the grounds that her late husband was a foreigner.

International Community Divided

With Myanmar headed for a possible food crisis soon and continued military domination in the medium term, how could the rest of the world exert any influence?

"The international community remains divided about how to engage with Myanmar's shrewd real-politik and near-xenophobic apprehensions about the outside world," said Rettig. "This therefore allows the military junta to play out the foreign powers. Self-imposed isolation has been abandoned by opening, if not cultivating, relations with neighbouring countries such as India, China, and Thailand who are in it for domestic interests, strategic reasons, as well as for access to the country's natural resources. Unconditional aid provided by these countries has been accepted, thus showing the advantages of basing foreign policy on self-interest rather than humanitarian values."

Rettig also describes Myanmar's accession to ASEAN in 1997 as a clever move that has substantially shielded the government from criticisms and allowed it a free ride to the detriment of the organisation's international standing. "As yet, ASEAN's promise that constructive engagement and increased economic and political ties would bring the country more strongly into the fold of the international community has not materialised," he said. "Several ASEAN governments and parliaments have increasingly voiced their discontent about a government that demands a lot but offers little in return, while others staunchly uphold the principle of non-interference."

In contrast to Myanmar's nearest neighbours and ASEAN, most western countries and media largely condemn the State Peace and Development Council's track record, but are far from united with regards to the modalities of engagement. Some openly, or not so openly, maintain trade relations thus raising concern about western double standards. Other governments have implemented economic sanctions that have mainly hit innocent Burmese rather than the military elite and their business partners. More intelligent, 'targeted' sanctions were subsequently introduced, though they will remain mostly ineffectual and symbolic as long as other governments continue to do business with Myanmar. The SDPC hence profits from an international collective action problem in that different governments pursue different policies towards the regime.

In fact it is likely that China, Myanmar's neighbour and 'big brother', and Russia would exercise their veto right as Permanent Members of the UN Security Council against any UN-led action. Rettig is of the view that the recent invocation of the new UN humanitarian intervention principle of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) will not lead to any action against Myanmar's 'democide', i.e. killing its own citizens, in this case through neglect to provide adequate aid to the cyclone victims and refusal to accept UN humanitarian relief. "As the case of Iraq suggests, bombing a regime out of power is easier than state-building, in particular as Myanmar is a far less developed state than Iraq was, contains far more ethnicities and religions, and offers far less lucrative bounty than the oil-rich Middle Eastern country," comments Rettig.

In sum, the prospects look rather bleak if not outright depressing. Senior General Than Shwe's regime seems as firmly in power as ever. The international community is divided and incapable of coordinated action. The big losers are the survivors of Cyclone Nargis and the population of Myanmar at large.

A Faint Glimmer of Hope?

However, on a slightly less downbeat note, Rettig points out that -- although far from perfect and a huge disappointment to the legitimate winners of the 1990 elections -- the current political process might provide the only platform acceptable to the SDPC from which to gradually 'learn' democracy, no matter how imperfect and biased towards continued military control.

He draws parallels with another ASEAN member country, Indonesia. "President Suharto operated a similar system that lasted until 1998, though what distinguished 'Pak Harto' from General Than Shwe was that he had greater trust in his technocrats, and also enjoyed the western support that the SPDC is so afraid of," he said. "It remains to be seen whether Than Shwe's plans will succeed," Rettig added. "Aged 75 this year, he may experience the transience of power as many other leaders before him. By his own standards, if he prevents this from happening, he will go down as a great leader in Myanmar history."


There are other reasons to hope for a better future. "The solidarity that Myanmar nationals -- within and outside the country -- have displayed towards each other is admirable. Lower-ranking officers have shown initiative in terms of providing relief but were pushed back. Despite the junta's attempts to politicise and thereby discredit humanitarian aid, the international community has done its best to deliver humanitarian aid to the cyclone victims in a non-partisan manner through formal as well as more creative channels. Above all, the human dignity of the victims has been humbling" Rettig observed.


"It would be wise to build on the momentum as the next three years may be crucial," he advises. "The international community needs to coordinate the different interests and priorities of its member states better so as to be ready

for the next potential crisis. It should convey to the military junta that a famine might backfire, and is not in the immediate or longer term interests of a regime that clings on to power but may just be swept away by a chain of unforeseen events beyond its control.”

At the same time, Rettig proposes that western countries should go out of their way to acknowledge the junta’s achievements in pacifying the country, or at least their de facto existence no matter how despicable they may find them. “Think about Europe’s Thirty Years War (1618-48) and the bloody state formation thereafter,” he points out. “It is too easy to criticise authoritarian regimes from a distance, whereas proximity or the need for some of their resources seem to ensure a more pragmatic world view. Populist, and short-term foreign policy that envisions Myanmar entirely in terms of democracy is too reductionist and prevents the establishment of wider contacts that may be crucial in the future. The European experiences of engagement with the Warsaw Pact countries, or three decades of open US support for President Suharto suggest that this is possible and could lead to regime change.”

As for Myanmar’s immediate neighbours and ASEAN members that trade with the regime, they should consider whether constructive engagement could also contain some critical leverage. “A more democratic and open Myanmar would make for a better trade partner after all,” concludes Rettig.

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